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ABSTRACT

A simple role playing exercise provides a device for helping public relations students to develop their own idea of what ethical behavior is, why it is important, and how it can become a practical part of their daily lives as public relations practitioners. A few basic premises apply to the problems of ethical behavior in organizations: (1) consequences of ethical behavior can be quantified, and it is advantageous to be able to demonstrate a material benefit of ethical behavior; (2) ethical precepts must be stated in terms of organizational goals; and (3) public relations practitioners must continuously explain and justify their actions to superiors. It is the role of public relations personnel to intervene ethically, and the rewards of such intervention can be greater than the risks. Most often this intervention involves writing a memorandum to a superior. Thus a role playing exercise in which the students write a memo on an ethical problem to an instructor in the role of an obstinate and somewhat unimaginative boss provides the real world ethical education the students need. Some common problems that could be used for such an exercise include the cover-up of a hazardous condition, the exaggeration of the benefits of a program, and the questionable expenditure of funds. (JL)

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PUBLIC RELATIONS DIVISION

WILL "ETHICAL BEHAVIOR" BENEFIT AN ORGANIZATION?
STUDENTS CAN LEARN BY TRYING TO CONVINCE OTHERS

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The fundamental problem in trying to "teach" ethics is that individuals are not particularly susceptible to indoctrination in moral behavior. Parents, schools and organized religion devote endless years prodding and cajoling young people into "being good" and "doing what is right" -- with decidedly mixed results.

How, then, does a college instructor hope to instill in students an appreciation of the importance of professional ethics? Is it enough to lecture on the subject for an hour? Will a perceptive exam question and the resulting blue book full of scribblings cause the student to appreciate and internalize the concept of ethical behavior?¹

Alas, most teachers of public relations, faced with the task of covering a large body of knowledge in ten or fifteen weeks, must pay lip service to the subject of ethics. We hope that our adamancy and passion on the subject will somehow impress the students that it is of great importance, even though it may not be quite worthy of its own exercise, project or final exam question.

What is needed -- and what this paper hopes to provide -- is a simple device for helping students to develop their own idea of what ethical behavior is, why it is important, and how it can become a practical (rather than merely theoretical) part of their daily lives as public relations practitioners.

CAN ETHICS BE "TAUGHT"?

There is a serious question as to whether ethics can be "taught" -- i.e., transmitted -- or whether ethical standards can be formed only through participation in a society which has shared values and behavioral norms.²

In a current article, this author suggests that the technique of role-playing is useful for helping students to try out behaviors and expressions of personal opinion which they think may be appropriate in the everyday world where ethical problems arise.³ When students are given the opportunity to participate in realistic situations which confront public relations practitioners, the complexities of real-life behavior are simulated. The students then come to realize that the "correct ethical choice" for one participant in the scenario is not necessarily shared by the other actors.

SOME UNDERLYING PREMISES

Before addressing the problem of designing an exercise which will help the student to operationalize the concept of ethical behavior, it is useful to state a few basic premises which apply to most professional public relations situations:

PREMISE #1A -- In the professional PR context, the

consequences of "ethical behavior" usually can be quantified in terms of "what we win" and "what we lose." The "what we win" dimension often provides only a short-term gain. The "what we lose" dimension often results in a long-term loss.

PREMISE #1B -- Ethical behavior frequently involves the sacrifice of a material gain in order to realize a spiritual (moral) gain. Often that is difficult to rationalize in an organization which has material gain as a strong motivating force. Therefore, it is advantageous to be able to demonstrate a material benefit of ethical behavior. "Being ethical" is more palatable if it pays some tangible dividend.

PREMISE #2 -- Public relations as an enterprise cannot exist separate from the goals of the organization of which it is a part. Therefore, ethical precepts, in order to be taken seriously, must be stated in terms of organizational goals.

PREMISE #3 -- Public relations activities are carried on by practitioners who continuously must explain and rationalize their actions to superiors in the organization, or to clients. The superior or the client may not have formed any notions of ethical behavior and may discourage the effort of the practitioner to frame a discussion in terms of ethical considerations.

IS "ETHICAL INTERVENTION" FEASIBLE?

Students can readily understand the underlying premises listed above. As the concepts are explained by the instructor,

it will surely occur to the students that "whistle-blowing" on matters of ethics could be a risky undertaking for the neophyte PR staff member.

But PR practitioners eventually come to appreciate that their role in an organization is to intervene. They must take the responsibility -- and the risk -- of analyzing the consequences of various behaviors. Indeed, the conscientious PR practitioner must attempt to draw up an ethical "Balance Sheet" which outlines acceptable reasons for taking the ethical course of action. To be taken seriously, such a Balance Sheet must be framed in terms of the organization's long-term goals.

The PR staff member who is willing and able to take such a risk should find that it pays off in terms of personal success within the organization. All things being equal, an organization would just as soon follow the ethical path. The reward goes to the one who can chart that path without losing sight of the main road to an organization's goals.

WRITING THE "DEAR BOSS" MEMO

The vehicle for charting the straight path is the memorandum to the immediate superior. (The importance of helping students learn how to write effective internal correspondence is the subject of an earlier Association for Education in Journalism PR Division paper by this author.)⁴

In one of the weekly writing assignments in the basic Principles of Public Relations or Public Relations Writing

course found in most curricula, students can be required to prepare a memo which points up an existing or potential ethical problem. They must weigh the pros and cons of various alternative approaches to solving the problem, and then they must argue persuasively for the "ethical" course of action.

It can be particularly useful, once the assignment is afoot, if the instructor role-plays the obstinate and somewhat unimaginative superior who has a "show me" attitude -- you've got to make the issue crystal clear, and don't dare make any assumptions that I share your philosophy or ethical frame of reference.

This means that the instructor must be willing to bounce the first submissions of the memos back to the students with curt marginal comments demanding clarification, or proof, of major points. In short, the PR teacher must be willing to needle and cajole his or her students in the same way journalistic reporting and editing instructors traditionally get across the rough-and-tumble precepts of the real-world newsroom.

SITUATIONS FROM THE "REAL WORLD"

An entire class could be required to write a memo concerning the same ethical problem. But because the world of public relations is so rich with examples, it is useful to prepare a list of varied topics from which students may choose. Or, the topics can be randomly assigned. The exercise then can be broadened to include classroom presentation and discussion

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of selected cases.5

The following list suggests situations which warrant memos to the boss on ethical matters:

1. COVER-UP OF A HAZARDOUS CONDITION. It is rumored that employees working in a university's animal science research facility have experienced an abnormal incidence of diseases, including cancer. The illnesses may be caused by bacteria spread through a faulty ventilation system. The public relations department knows that the university's administration is "sitting on" a damaging study prepared by the associate director of the research facility in hopes that federal funding can be obtained for a study and remedial modifications to the ventilation system before the problem is made public. Meanwhile, classes and research in the facility continue as normal.

2. EXAGGERATION OF THE BENEFITS OF A PROGRAM. A state agency is using appropriated funds to improve inner-city housing for the elderly. The project -- run mainly by political appointees -- has cost millions. But only a handful of elderly persons have been placed in renovated housing, and that gain was made mainly through federal funds. Nevertheless, brochures and fact sheets disseminated by the state make grandiose claims for the scope and success of the program.

3. QUESTIONABLE EXPENDITURE OF FUNDS. The Board of Directors of a nonprofit group has approved a five-year capital expenditure plan to build a new national headquarters for the

organization. Component state groups assessed for the bulk of the cost of the project have been told that rationale for the new facility is that the organization loses prestige because it does not have a suitable headquarters. The new facility has been designed to include sumptuous suites for top executives, including private bathrooms and kitchenettes. The move comes at a time when national membership is down and many state components are hard-pressed to keep staff members on salary.

4. LAME EFFORT TO SUPPORT SOCIAL AIMS. A manufacturing company has stated in its annual report that "every effort is being made" to increase the hiring of minority workers from communities where plants are located. A director of minority hiring has been named but, in reality, only one quarter of her time is devoted to affirmative action concerns. Statistics on minority hiring have been inflated by including part-time workers in tables which formerly listed only full-time workers.

5. COZY RELATIONSHIP WITH LEGISLATOR. A defense contractor, heavily dependant on federal funds, has developed a symbiotic relationship with a certain Congressman who is in a position to influence defense spending legislation. The Congressman is lavishly entertained both in Washington and on visits to cities near the contractor's plant sites. The firm has arranged for him to be listed as a member of the Board of Directors of various civic organizations, which enhances his prestige but requires no participation on his part. The chief executive officer of the firm is fond of saying "One hand washes the other in this world!"

6. PERVERSIVE INFLUENCE. A large manufacturing firm makes no secret of its paternalistic control of the "company town" in which its headquarters are located. No mayor is elected without the blessing (and monetary support) of the firm. No attempt at civic improvement succeeds unless the company approves of the proposal. While a lively group of dissidents manages to keep political discussion alive, most of them are resigned to the "realities" of living with Big Brother.

7. PSEUDO-EVENTS AS RED HERRINGS. A government agency has had no real impact on the community. It has spawned no new ideas or programs in recent memory, and it has made no particular attempt to assess the effectiveness of ongoing programs. Nevertheless, the director of the agency has become adept at using open houses, tours, press conferences, bigwig visits and other non-events to keep his department's name in the public spotlight, creating the illusion that something worthwhile is being done with the taxpayer's money.

These situations are real enough, and it may be useful to flesh them out with more facts and information about the organizations involved. In fact, it is a rare semester when similar cases do not leap out from the pages of the local newspaper, inviting classroom discussion.

EVALUATION AND FEEDBACK

When grading the assignment, the instructor should assess

letters written by the students -- the teacher of public relations can feel reasonably assured that future practitioners have begun to learn how to deal with problems of ethics in an organization.

FOOTNOTES

1. See, for example: Clifford G. Christians, "Variety of Approaches Used in Teaching Media Ethics," Journalism Educator, Vol. 33, No.1 (April 1978) pp. 3-8; Richard A. Schwarzlose, "Socratic Method Adds Zest to Ethics, Law Classes," Journalism Educator, Vol. 33, No. 1 (April 1978) pp. 9-13, 24; S. Scott Whitlow and G. Norman Van Tubergen, "Patterns of Ethical Decisions Among Investigative Reporters," Mass Comm Review, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Winter 1978-79) pp. 2-9.

2. See, for example: James W. Carty Jr.: "Should J-Schools Teach Ethics?", Journalism Educator, Vol. 33, No. 1 (April 1978) p. 8; John C. Merrill, "Do We Teach Ethics -- or Do We Teach About Ethics?", Journalism Educator, Vol. 33, No. 2 (July, 1978) pp. 59-60.

3. Todd Hunt, "Role-Playing -- A Useful Way to Raise the Issue of Ethics," Journalism Educator (Spring 1982, in press).

4. Todd Hunt, "Teaching Students to Write the Confirming Letter -- A Basic Tool for Public Relations Management," paper presented to the Public Relations Division of the Association for Education in Journalism, East Lansing, Michigan, August 10, 1981.

5. These exercises will appear, in slightly different form, in James E. Grunig and Todd Hunt, Managing Public Relations, (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, in press).